

You Thought They Said Trains

by Susanne Barringer

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> AUTHOR: Susanne Barringer
 EMAIL: sbarringer@usa.net
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"When they handed out brains, you thought they said trains and you missed yours."

I look up from the case report I'm trying to make sense of and stare at Scully, who is sitting across the desk from me. "Excuse me?"

She smiles at what I'm sure is a confused expression on my face. "My father used to say that, when we were kids. You know, if we did something stupid or didn't use our common sense."

"Run that by me again?"

"You've never heard it?" She repeats the phrase, this time more slowly. "When they handed out brains, you thought they said trains and you missed yours."

"Clever. And you're saying this to me because . . .?" I'm not really sure what she's trying to tell me. I wouldn't be surprised if I'd screwed up another expense report or something.

She gives a little half-laugh, and her eyes are soft. "No reason. I just thought of it. You know how sometimes a memory just pops into your head from out of nowhere?"

"Okay, so you're just saying it to say it, not directing it toward me?" I must sound paranoid.

"When you do something stupid, Mulder, I'm usually more direct than that, don't you think?" She rolls her eyes a bit, as if to admonish me for my generally stupid behavior.

I put on a puzzled look to tease her. "I don't remember. It's been so long since I've done anything stupid."

Scully grabs a wadded-up piece of paper off the desk and tosses it in my direction. It bounces off my head and hits the floor. I feign injury and Scully looks her usual not-quite-bemused self as she leans back in her chair and stretches.

"I'm sure your father never had to lecture you about brains, Scully. I picture you as the perfectly behaved child. You know, always following the rules." I wonder if she remembers that I used to tease her about her always "by the book" mentality when she first came to the X-Files. My, how things change.

She looks at me with a gentle smile and I know she remembers. "It wasn't that I was a bad kid," she explains, "I just let my curiosity get the best of my common sense sometimes. I was very curious. That made me do stupid things."

I lean forward, placing my elbows on the reports I've been studying. "Do tell." I'm happy to take a break from bureaucracy. If engaging Scully in conversation about her childhood is a way to accomplish that, I'm in.

"Something stupid I did?"

"Everything stupid you did."

Scully gives me an annoyed look but seems willing to play along. "Oh, you know, usual kid stuff. Sticking a nail file in an electric socket, using shoe polish to dye my hair, pretending to drive the car and rolling it down the driveway." I say nothing in response, hoping she'll follow up with one of those stories in more detail. This is fascinating.

She twirls a pen in her hand for a few seconds but eventually picks up the silent cue. "Did I ever tell you I got suspended from school?" She has a delighted look on her face, like she's proud of having a little dirt to share.

"No, I think you neglected to tell me that little tidbit. I must've

missed it in the FBI background check."

"It was in fourth grade. I liberated all the class pets." Damned if she doesn't look proud about it either.

"You liberated them?"

"Yep. While everyone was at recess one day, I opened all their cages and set them free out the window. A rabbit, two mice, and a turtle."

"And they suspended you for that?"

"Two days. I was mortified. They called my parents and everything." She gives a little shrug. I guess she's gotten over it, though I wonder how much of a lecture that little escapade got her from her Dad.

"I'm surprised you didn't become a veterinarian, Scully. You seem to have a soft spot for animals."

She shakes her head in disagreement. "Actually, I was kind of known in the family for torturing them--unintentionally, of course. Or killing them," she adds. I quirk an eyebrow of interest in her direction. "I had a real fascination with life, the body, the way it functions. I used our pets to experiment." Her eyes look far away, wrapped up in memories.

"Should I call you Dr. FrankenScully?" I tease. I wonder if she'll tell me what she's remembering.

"Worse, probably." She chuckles to herself and I see a slight flush rise across her cheeks. Is she embarrassed about her childhood exploits? I think I really need to hear that story now.

"What did you do?" I ask, figuring direct is best at this point. She's fallen into an easy disclosure about her childhood, which she doesn't talk about very often, so I might as well take advantage of it.

"Well, once I put Missy's hamster in the toilet to see if he could swim."

"Could he?"

"Not well enough, apparently. He drowned."

I have to stifle my urge to laugh. It's funny, but Scully looks serious, like it still haunts her. I don't want to make light of it, and I also definitely don't want to stop this conversation. I'm learning too much, all the things about Scully I don't know. She really does keep unfolding with every month that I know her.

"So, that was one of your 'When they handed out brains you thought they said trains' moments, I suppose?"

She looks up at me from studying her fingernails. "Yes, I guess that qualifies. I was so horrified by what happened that I just left him there until my father found him." She offers up a weak smile, but I can tell it's a cover. I wonder if she still feels guilty about

having taken a life, even if it was just a hamster. It's just the kind of thing that Scully would regret.

I'm surprised when she continues the conversation without prompting. "My other experiments weren't quite so deadly; they mostly just pissed off the animals."

"Like . . .?"

"Like when the cat bit me because I tried to take her temperature."

I don't laugh. It's a struggle. "Don't tell me you tried to put a thermometer in a cat's mouth?" I ask, truly incredulous.

"It wasn't a real thermometer--just a plastic one from my play doctor's kit." I nod my understanding. Then she adds, "And it wasn't her mouth." She looks down at the desk with a shy smile and fiddles with the corner of a file folder.

All attempts I've made not to laugh are lost as the guffaw explodes. I can't help it. Scully looks up at me and is grinning broadly, so I know it's okay. Then she laughs too, a silvery chime above my own deep boom. We sound nice together.

"Your poor pets," I say sympathetically, once I've gotten over the image of Scully jamming a plastic thermometer up her cat's ass. "Is that why you chose pathology? No live patients to torture?"

She looks at me with amusement. "Something like that."

"You must've felt guilty about that hamster." I take my chances by mentioning it. "Your mom told me about the time you and your brothers killed a snake and you felt guilty enough to hold it in your hands and try to bring it back to life."

"When did she tell you that?" She looks at me in puzzlement.

The moment suddenly comes back to me and I wonder what I should say. When we were picking up your tombstone? I'm pretty sure she knows her mother did that, but I really have no idea what exactly she knows because this is one of those things we never talk about. Not in these terms anyway. We talk about her implant or her cancer, but never about those missing days, what happened while she was gone.

"When you were missing," I say finally. I don't miss the slight widening of her eyes.

The conversation stops dead. It's the dreaded "thing we don't discuss." The laughter has exited the room and all we're left with is jarring silence.

Scully stares off at the wall behind me for what seems too long, then slowly slides her gaze to meet mine. "What, you two sat around and told stories about me?" Her voice is tight and controlled.

"Not exactly." I shift uncomfortably in my chair. It's not like I'm reluctant to talk about this. I've always been willing, when she was ready. But now years have passed and it seems like something tucked too far away in our past to be dusting off now.

"Mulder," she says with a warning tone, obviously suspicious of my reticence. "When did my mother tell you that story?"

I take a deep breath. "The day we went to pick up your grave marker. Your mother told me that story to explain why she needed to do it, why she needed to put some closure on your disappearance."

She doesn't look shocked or surprised. She doesn't look anything. It's like she's totally unaffected by the thought of how close we were to etching her death permanently in stone. The fact that we were just talking about taking a cat's temperature a moment ago makes the whole thing seem even more absurd.

She is silent for some time, and I wonder if this is going to become an issue between us, now, after all these years. She avoids my gaze, blinking slowly several times as if clearing her vision.

Then she suddenly straightens up in her chair, like she's throwing off the darkness of the moment from her shoulders. She pushes the files in front of her aside and leans an elbow on the desk, propping her chin in her palm.

"So, Mulder, your turn. Tell me some stories about your childhood. I bet you were a handful."

Okay, I can deal with this. If it'll take Scully's mind off the wrong turn we just made into seriousness, I'll tell her every secret I have.

"Well, I wouldn't say I did anything really stupid, like put a hamster in the toilet," I tease. That wins me an evil glare. "But I did tend to get in trouble for being too clever."

"Spill it, Mulder."

"Okay. When I was about ten, my friend Nixon and I came up with a brilliant plan. Someone had been by my house collecting for charity and my mom gave her five dollars."

"His name was Nixon?" she interrupts.

"You got a problem with that?"

She shrugs. "No stranger than Fox, I guess."

"Can I continue?"

"Please." She lifts her chin so she can use her hand to motion me to keep talking, then replaces it and slides up in the chair to lean forward even more.

"Well, we figured why couldn't we do that? So, we cut out pictures of kids from magazines and pasted them on empty coffee cans and a few days later went around to all the neighbors collecting for starving children in Ethiopia. Then we spent all the money on comic books."

"And you never got caught?" Scully is laughing inside. I can see it in her eyes, but she retains her composure. I know she's trying to

pretend she thinks it's not funny.

"Oh, we got caught. Later that day Mrs. Dennis down the street called my mom and told her what we were doing."

"What gave you away?"

"I think it was probably the name of the organization. I was smart enough not to use the name of a real place in town, just in case somebody checked. So I made up sort of a conglomeration." I give her the look, the "we're headed for the punchline" look.

"What was it?" she asks, as a good straight-man should.

"The Synagogue of the Blessed Virgin."

Scully bursts out laughing and I win. "I see the problem," she says with a wide grin.

"The amazing thing is that Mrs. Dennis is the only one who noticed! We made forty bucks in an hour and a half."

"Fox and Nixon, young entrepreneurs." She laughs again. "So what happened?"

"My parents made me donate my allowance for three months to the real starving children. But I still thought it was a brilliant plan."

"It was brilliant." She nods her approval. I'm surprised. "How come you never told me that story, Mulder?"

"It's not exactly something I like to brag about. I much prefer people knowing me as the intelligent grown-up I now am, with much foresight and wisdom."

"Forgive me while I get sick," she mumbles. I give her an amused look.

We look at each other for a few moments. It feels awkward, both of us half-grinning and reveling in long-untold secrets. There's a certain intimacy to sharing your childhood with someone who knows you as well as we know each other. Always something new to learn. The moment is one of those rare ones that feels just right, like I could sit here and look at her this way forever and not mind it one bit.

Scully eventually breaks the trance and reaches over to get the files she had moved. Back to work, as usual. I'm disappointed that we aren't going to continue this, but in many ways it's been a big step for us.

I return to my paperwork although I can't really concentrate. Scully is fidgeting in her chair. Something's wrong. When I look up at her she meets my gaze, but this time there's no smile behind it.

"So you were there? You were there to pick up the stone to mark my grave?" she asks suddenly, and my stomach tilts at the return to the forbidden subject. It takes a second for me to understand what's bothering her.

"Scully, when you were missing, I hadn't given up. Your mom hadn't given up either, but she needed that closure. It wasn't that way for me. Because of Samantha, I was used to having open ends. I didn't want closure, and I never would have, not if it was that kind of closure." She winces in some kind of distress that I can never understand. I can only try to reassure her.

"Scully, I wouldn't have ever given up on you until I had the proof."

I think maybe she's going to make a joke about me needed proof of anything, that she's going to joke her way out of this moment. But she doesn't.

"I know, Mulder."

"Do you? Do you know how much I will never give up on you, no matter what? Even with your name on that gravestone, I refused to accept that as anything more than temporary."

She studies me carefully, as if making sure that I am who I claim to be and not some shape-shifting Mulder who's suddenly become serious.

"I need that. Please don't ever give up on me." I'm floored by her sudden candor, the vulnerability. And I can't believe she could doubt me. Not after Antarctica, not after she's seen my commitment to finding Samantha.

Then I see the fear shimmy in her eyes, and I'm astonished that I never noticed it before. She's scared. After all this time, she's still scared.

"Scully, what are you afraid of?" She looks at me curiously, then her forehead crinkles in what looks like pain.

"I don't know, Mulder. How can I know?" She doesn't meet my eyes. "How can we know what to fear when we don't even know what we're close to?" She sighs as her words finish, and it hurts to know that I can't give her the answers she wants. That I can't even tell her what happened to her when she was taken. The uncertainty has been our biggest obstacle, one that has blocked us from the truth for years.

Scully doesn't look at me until she begins speaking again. "Why do you think science is so important to me? Why do you think I need it?" I'm not sure if it's a rhetorical question, but I answer anyway.

"Because with science, you know what to fear." She nods, and I know I've hit the heart of the matter.

"Hamsters don't swim," she says softly. "If you leave a hamster in the toilet, he'll drown. I discovered that when I was six, and I'm still sure of it today."

I don't really know how to respond to that, so I don't. She doesn't wait for me to think of something. "You need my science, Mulder, to help you explain to others what you know to be true yourself. I need you . . ." she hesitates as if not sure those are the appropriate

words, then she abandons the sentence altogether.

The fear lingers, shining like a silent harbinger across her face. Its presence sends a chill through me.

"Tell me what you're afraid of, Scully." She's holding back something, something that I quickly realize I must know if we are going to ever move past the neatly-pressed life we have ironed out for ourselves.

She doesn't answer immediately, like she's trying to find the words to express what I saw in her eyes. When she speaks, it is with conviction, her gaze clutching mine as if she's drowning. "That I'll be lost."

My chest constricts at her words, the hazy tears in her eyes pulling at my own. "I'll find you, Scully," I whisper.

Her look doesn't change, the words seemingly bouncing off of her with no effect. Then she shakes her head in the negative.

"No, Mulder. That's not what I mean." Her words are tinged with frustration, with hurt. She looks down to study her finger stroking along the edge of the desk. "Not taken, lost."

Lost. This isn't about being abducted anymore. I can see that from the wounded look on her face.

"Scully?" We're talking in blind phrases, in giant all-encompassing generalities and metaphors. Why is this so much more difficult than sharing our childhood stupidity stories?

She heaves a sigh and gives me a look that could freeze the soul. "Sometimes I think maybe you're the one who won't come back."

Something clicks in my mind, not from her words so much as from the way she is looking at me. She has lost faith in me. I'm not unaware of the causes, though it could rightly be any number of ditches, any number of accusations, any number of challenges when she only had my best interests at heart. I haven't always handled them well. I also haven't failed to notice the hurt I have sometimes caused, the effect of my choices. I have made her doubt me, although that has never been my intention. "I thought they said trains," I say finally, hoping she will understand the apology that I can never seem to bring myself to make, the hundred apologies I have never made.

I see affection in her eyes, and forgiveness. Always forgiveness, no matter what.

"Next time they pass out things, pay more attention," she says. A smile unfolds before the pain, before the fear, cloaking once again a rare moment of revelation.

She nods slightly, then resumes our work, returning us to a prior moment in time but with so much more substance than before.

END

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 Feedback to: sbarringer@usa.net

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All my fanfic available at
> <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Dreamworld/2442>

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